

Libby

Meetings set to plan future of Asa Wood

By JEREMIE VELLA
The Western News

Members of the community met Wednesday evening to discuss the possibility of closing Asa Wood Elementary School.

About 30 people showed up at the Little Theatre to listen to Kirby Maki, Libby School District superintendent, introduce the first step in the process. He wants to develop a planning committee that will look into the complicated details and various options before the community.

"The point of this meeting is to decide do we need a new school and what is the best way to get it," Maki said.

While a planning committee was not officially formed, everyone agreed that it was necessary in order to decide the future of Asa Wood.

The current elementary school is contaminated with asbestos and is widely believed to no longer be a suitable area for children. As many in the audience proposed options and expressed concerns for a future school, few spoke out in favor of cleaning up Asa Wood or retrofitting the school, which was built in 1953.

Lee Disney suggested that an adjustment of the middle and high schools to include more grades, along side the building of an extension in between the schools, could solve the problem without the costs of an entirely new building.

That plan would involve moving eighth graders to the high school and kindergarten through third graders into the middle school.

He also noted that transportation costs would be less burdensome for the city as it will only have to bus students to one campus.

But some parents worried about seeing their children alongside older students, while others expressed concern that physical education, art and music programs would be cramped by the grade adjustment.

"This is why we need the committee! So we can all throw options out there and see which are the best," Disney exclaimed as criticisms and questions were brought up about his consolidation plan.

The other major option involves constructing a new building that is estimated to cost \$12 million. Funding could possibly come from an EPA fund of \$8 million and federal grant money.

Sen. Max Baucus recently, and quite publicly, encouraged the EPA to use the \$8 million for a new elementary school, but it is unclear how much of that money, if any, will be available for construction.

Libby will know the extent of federal support by the end of the fiscal year, though Maki has already submitted a proposal and estimated cost analysis.

Bonding is another financial option, though it was not discussed in detail at the meeting.

John Peterson, an architect with Architects Design Group, presented a series of aspects for the community to consider, including the make up of students in the future, anticipated growth and energy efficiency.

He suggested several reasons for a new school including increased room for computer and technology labs, cleaner air quality and the absence of any asbestos contamination.

Any community member is eligible to serve on the planning committee.

Meetings will follow bi-weekly at 5:30 p.m. on Wednesdays at the Little Theatre.